

REVIEW

William Robinson 1838–1935. Father of the English Flower Garden. By MEA ALLAN. 255 p., 37 plates, 10 line drawings. Faber and Faber Ltd., London. 1982. \$19.95.

William Robinson certainly was the “father” of today’s English flower garden, just as his friend Gertrude Jekyll was its “mother.” Any Californian familiar with the genre will not be surprised to find that Robinson visited the state early in his career (1870) and was profoundly affected by what he saw. After visiting Asa Gray in Cambridge, Massachusetts, Robinson and his brother James set out on the newly completed trans-continental railroad for San Francisco. Here he visited Henry Bolander and went on a collecting trip with Dr. Albert Kellogg to the Sierra Nevada and the White Mountains looking for North American alpine. Thus, the gardens of San Francisco and Santa Barbara may be considered as predecessors of (or at least influential on) those of Sussex and Kent, and not vice versa. He was also impressed with how Americans planted their cemeteries. This is reflected in *God’s Acre Beautiful: Or the Cemeteries of the Future* (1880), revised as *Cremation and Urn Burial* (1889). On the boat back to England, he took not only ideas that were to change profoundly gardening in Britain, but also a box of apples for Joseph Hooker, Director of the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew as a gift from Gray.

Robinson was born on 15 July 1838 in County Down, Northern Ireland. At the age of 23, having worked as a gardener since age 10, he went to London to join the newly created Royal Botanic Society’s Garden in Regent’s Park, now the home of the London Zoo. In less than three years, he was Foreman in Charge of the Educational and Herbaceous Department. During this time he began to write for *The Gardener’s Chronicle*, establishing his reputation as a knowledgeable plantsman and soon becoming a regular contributor. Robinson resigned from the RBSG in 1866, determined to make his way as a writer on horticultural subjects.

The International Exhibition of 1867 in Paris provided Robinson with a look at Continental gardens and gardening methods, and also with his first two published books: *Gleanings from French Gardens* (1868; ed. 2, 1869) and *The Parks and Gardens of Paris* (1869; ed. 2, 1878). He spent nearly a year in France, visited alpine Switzerland and Italy, and returned to England inspired to write his first book (*Alpine Flowers for English Gardens*), which, however, was not published until 1870 (ed. 3, 1903). It anticipated Reginald Farrer, usually thought of as the inspiration for alpine flower gardening, by 37 years.

Robinson’s revolutionary ideas on gardening and garden design were expounded in a number of books and periodicals. He founded, among others, *The Garden* (1871), *Gardening Illustrated* (1879), *The Garden Annual, Almanack and Address Book* (1881), *Farm and Home* (1882), *Woods and Forests* (1883), *Cottage Gardening* (1892), and *Forest and Sylva* (1903). Most were quite popular, and several are still published, although under other names. His *The Wild Garden* (1870; ed. 5, 1895, reprinted 1977) still bears reading by those who wish to garden in a less formal manner, or who, like me, have a piece of woods they wish to make more attractive. *The English Flower Garden* (1883; ed. 15, 1933; ed. 16 revised by Roy Hay, 1956) is “the most widely read flower gardening book ever written.”

As a result of the income from his popular books and periodicals, William Robinson became a wealthy man. In 1885 he bought Gravetye Manor, 360 acres in Sussex. By 1892 he had acquired additional property, bringing his total to 1100 acres. He was now able to put theory to the test and begin to garden on a grand scale himself. The results were spectacular. Planting, cutting, testing, and discarding turned him into a first-rate landscape gardener. Thus, the later editions of his books are full of advice gleaned from his own growing experiences, not merely descriptions of how the Americans or the French grow this or that.

Charles Sprague Sargent, Director of Harvard’s Arnold Arboretum, in 1898 invited

the now-famous Robinson to make a second visit to the United States, but this never came about. From 1910 until his death, Robinson was confined to bed and wheelchair because of a spinal injury complicated by what appears to have been syphilis. In spite of the latter, he lived and wrote for another quarter of a century. Gravetye Manor was left to the British nation upon Robinson's death. Despite neglect and change during the Second World War, it is once again as Robinson planned it, the quintessential English flower garden.

One might quibble with an occasional nomenclatural error, or the publisher's choice of some of the illustrations, but these are minor criticisms. As she did with *Darwin and His Flowers* (1977), the late Mea Allen in her last book has made a man, his era, and its flowers come alive for us avid readers.—DUNCAN M. PORTER, Department of Biology, Virginia Polytechnic Institute & State University, Blacksburg 24061.

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